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Brexit, Habermas, l'Unione europea e la democrazia

La frase che apre l'intervista di Habermas a *Social Europe*¹ non è priva di ironia (oltre che di malcelato disappunto). Ma non sono convinto affatto che il Brexit sia una sconfitta del capitalismo, né di quello globale né di quello britannico.

Gli economisti ci diranno fra qualche mese quali sono le reali conseguenze negative per l'economia inglese, per ora non si vedono con chiarezza, almeno agli occhi del non specialista. In realtà il voto in Gran Bretagna, oltre a segnalare una chiara rottura di posizioni fra l'Inghilterra, da un lato, e la Scozia e l'Irlanda del Nord, dall'altra sembra essere un *quasi-exit* di un paese *quasi-membro* dell'Unione Europea. Che non condivideva né la moneta unica né l'accordo di Schengen. Un paese che è stato sempre con un piede dentro ed un piede fuori l'Unione. Con una opinione pubblica che ha considerato per lo più i paesi continentali o come vecchi nemici (Francia) o come poveri di tradizione democratica (Germania, Italia, Spagna, ecc.). Con una cultura politico-costituzionale diversa da quella che si è affermata decisamente sul continente prima con la Rivoluzione Francese (sempre mal vista al di là dello *English Channel*) e poi con le corti costituzionali, nate prima in Austria e poi con maggiore forza dopo la seconda guerra mondiale in Germania, in Italia e poco alla volta in quasi tutti i paesi del continente ad eccezione che nel Regno Unito.

Il paradosso, uno dei paradossi di questo futuro ed ancora poco chiaro riposizionamento del Regno Unito nei confronti di quello che chiamano *the Continent* è che esso viene imposto da una consultazione popolare, senza valore legale, ad un sistema politico famoso per il suo attaccamento alla sovranità parlamentare.

Ripeto, ancora non sappiamo bene la forma che prenderà questo riposizionamento, ma esso prenderà molto tempo dei "burocrati" di Bruxelles. Al Max Planck Institut for Procedural Law di Lussemburgo si lavora già da parecchi mesi sulle modalità e le procedure del divorzio, che

¹ "It never entered my mind that populism would defeat capitalism in its country of origin" in <https://www.socialeurope.eu/2016/07/core-europe-to-the-rescue/>, intervista riprodotta in appendice a questo articolo.

deve essere amichevole e consensuale – Theresa May augura bene. Sul tema verranno scritti decine di articoli e molti libri.

Alla fine di questo percorso l'Inghilterra non sarà fuoriuscita dal mercato unico, ma avrà perso quasi ogni voce nel processo politico che chiamiamo integrazione europea.

Come osservava oggi Lucio Caracciolo su Repubblica, l'assenza futura della Gran Bretagna dal dibattito politico dell'Unione rappresenta per l'Italia una opportunità. L'abbiamo visto simbolicamente con l'invito di Angela Merkel allargato dal presidente Hollande (anche lui in procinto di uscire dalla scena, a differenza della Francia) al primo ministro italiano. La debolezza della Francia priva di una guida autorevole e l'assenza di un governo in Spagna, dove la legge elettorale sembra rendere impossibile la formazione di un governo, sono condizioni supplementari a favore di un possibile più importante ruolo dell'Italia in seno all'Unione. Se dopo il referendum ci sarà ancora un governo in Italia che la Germania possa prendere in seria considerazione. (Si dice che il referendum deve essere sulla riforma costituzionale, ma non c'è dubbio che l'effetto sarà sul ruolo dell'Italia in Europa, e non c'è modo per evitare che sia così).

Una osservazione telegrafica sul ruolo della democrazia nel quadro della costruzione dell'Europa.

La democrazia rappresentativa è una forma dello stato nazione. A ma pare un segno di pigrizia mentale pensare che l'Unione possa essere una specie di Stato democratico *writ large*. E che si tratti dunque di trasporre le regole della democrazia nazionale al livello dell'Unione. C'è naturalmente chi contesta questo legame fra democrazia rappresentativa e stato nazione, assumendo che la democrazia è la forma universale (nello spazio e nel tempo) della vita politica. La storia sembra suggerire osservazioni che vanno in altro senso. Certo se si riduce la democrazia costituzionale ad elezioni, non si capisce nemmeno perché si continua a parlare di deficit democratico, visto che esiste un Parlamento Europeo eletto ed anche una Commissione quasi responsabile dinanzi ad esso. Eppure i cittadini prendono più sul serio, anche nella critica, i governi nazionali che quello dell'Unione.

Il Brexit rappresenta, così mi sembra, una lezione importante relativa al nostro ragionare circa quello che chiamiamo democrazia e che in realtà sono regole complesse per decidere insieme, dove *la minoranza deve accettare le decisioni prese dalla maggioranza in forma obbligatoria per tutti*.

I britannici, o almeno gli inglesi non hanno quasi mai accettato di essere *messi in minoranza* dai continentali. Si può chiedere a Giuliano Amato come si procedeva nella Convenzione Europea per redigere gli articoli del trattato costituzionale. Non ci sarebbe una democrazia in Italia, e non ci sarebbe il paese stesso, se le isole italiane non accettassero le decisioni prese dai “continentali”. È per questo che il Regno Unito ha frenato l'integrazione e spinto all'allargamento. Certo noi non accetteremmo di essere messi in minoranza se la maggioranza fosse oggi rappresentata dalla Ungheria e dalla Polonia! Più che di maggiore democrazia a me sembra che l'Unione ha bisogno, per decidere insieme di più, di maggior fiducia fra i paesi membri. Se non cresce la fiducia reciproca, non ci sarà più Europa, anche sul continente, piuttosto meno comunità di destino. In questo senso i prossimi mesi del percorso riformatore italiano sono decisivi. Certo, certo, si voterà in autunno sulle competenze della seconda camera ed altre delizie per noi costituzionalisti, che i cittadini guardano con poco interesse e qualche sospetto. Ma che piaccia o meno si vota sul futuro dell'Europa. Anche se un piccolo mondo di costituzionalisti provinciali non lo vuole capire. Speriamo che lo capiscano gli elettori.

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Core Europe To The Rescue: A Conversation With Jürgen Habermas About Brexit And The EU Crisis

Intervista a Jürgen Habermas - di Thomas Assheuer

Mr Habermas, did you ever think Brexit would be possible? What did you feel when you heard of the Leave campaign's victory?

It never entered my mind that populism would defeat capitalism in its country of origin. Given the existential importance of the banking sector for Great Britain and the media power and political clout of the City of London it was unlikely that identity questions would prevail against interests.

Many people are now demanding referenda in other countries. Would a referendum in Germany produce a different result from that in Great Britain?

Well, I do assume that. European integration was – and still is – in the interests of the German federal republic. In the early post-war decades it was only by acting cautiously as “good Europeans” that we were able to restore, step by step, an utterly devastated national reputation. Eventually, we could count on the backing of the EU for reunification. Retrospectively too, Germany has been the great beneficiary of the European currency union – and that too in the course of the euro crisis itself. And because Germany has, since 2010, been able to prevail in the European Council with its ordoliberal views against France and the southern Europeans it's pretty easy for Angela Merkel and Wolfgang Schäuble to play the role of the true defenders of the European idea back home. Of course, that's a very national way of looking at things. But this government need have no fears that the Press would take a different course and inform the population about the good reasons why other countries might see things in completely the opposite way.

So, you're accusing the Press of supinely kowtowing to the government? Indeed, Ms Merkel can hardly complain about the number of her critics. At least as regards her refugee policy.

Actually, that's not what we're talking about. But I make no bones about it. Refugee policy has also divided German public opinion and Press attitudes. That brought an end to long years of an unprecedented paralysis of public political debate. I was referring to this earlier, politically highly charged period of the euro crisis. That's when an equally tumultuous controversy about the federal government's policy towards the crisis might have been expected. A technocratic approach that kicks the can down the road is attacked as counter-productive all over Europe. But not in the leading two daily and two weekly publications that I read regularly. If this remark is correct then, as

a sociologist, one can look for explanations. But my perspective is that of an engaged newspaper reader and I wonder if Merkel's blanket policy of dulling everyone to sleep could have swept the country without a certain complicity on the part of the Press. Thought horizons shrink if there are no alternative views on offer. Right now, I can see a similar handing out of tranquillisers. Like in the report I've just read on the last policy conference of the SPD where the attitude of a governing party to the huge event of Brexit that must objectively be of consuming interest to everybody is reduced – in what Hegel would have called a valet's perspective – to the next general election and the personal relations between Mr Gabriel and Mr Schulz.

But hasn't the British desire to leave the EU national, homegrown reasons? Or is it symptomatic of a crisis in the European Union?

Both. The British have a different history behind them from that of the continent. The political consciousness of a great power, twice victorious in the 20th century, but globally in decline, hesitates to come to terms with the changing situation. With this national sense of itself, Great Britain fell into an awkward situation after joining the EEC for purely economic reasons in 1973. For the political elites from Thatcher via Blair to Cameron had no thought of dropping their aloof view of mainland Europe. That had already been Churchill's perspective when, in his rightly famous Zurich speech of 1946, he saw the Empire in the role of benevolent godfather to a united Europe – but certainly not part of it. British policy in Brussels was always a standoff carried out according to the maxim: "have our cake and eat it".

You mean its economic policy?

The British had a decidedly liberal view of the EU as a free trade area and this was expressed in a policy of enlarging the EU without any simultaneous deepening of co-operation. No Schengen, no euro. The exclusively instrumental attitude of the political elite towards the EU was reflected in the campaign of the Remain camp. The half-hearted defenders of staying in the EU kept strictly to a project fear campaign armed with economic arguments. How could a pro-European attitude win over the broader population if political leaders behaved for decades as if a ruthlessly strategic pursuit of national interests was enough to keep you inside a supranational community of states. Seen from afar, this failure of the elites is embodied, very different and full of nuances as they are, in the two self-absorbed types of player known as Cameron and Johnson.

In this ballot there wasn't just a striking young-old but a strong urban-rural divide. The multi-cultural city lost out. Why is there this sudden split between national identity and European integration? Did Europe's politicians underestimate the sheer persistent power of national and cultural self-will?

You're right, the British vote also reflects some of the general state of crisis in the EU and its member states. The voting analytics point to the same kind of pattern that we saw in the election for

the Austrian presidency and in our own recent state parliament elections in Germany. The relatively high turnout suggests that the populist camp succeeded in mobilising sections of previous non-voters. These can overwhelmingly be found among the marginalised groups who feel hung out to dry. This goes with the other finding that poorer, socially disadvantaged and less educated strata voted more often than not for Leave. So, not only contrary voting patterns in the country and in the cities but the geographical distribution of Leave votes, piling up in the Midlands and parts of Wales – including in the old industrial wastelands that have failed to regain their feet economically – these point to the social and economic reasons for Brexit. The perception of the drastic rise in social inequality and the feeling of powerlessness, that your own interests are no longer represented at the political level, all this forms the background to the mobilisation against foreigners, for leaving Europe behind, for hating Brussels. In an insecure daily life ‘a national and cultural sense of belonging’ are indeed stabilising elements.

But are these only social issues? There’s pretty well an historic trend towards national self-help and giving up on co-operation. Supranationality means, for ordinary people, loss of control. They think: Only the nation provides the rock on which they can still build. Doesn’t that show that the transformation from national to transnational democracy has fallen apart?

An effort that has hardly even begun cannot be said to have fallen apart. Of course, the call to “take back control” that played a role in the British campaign is a symptom to be taken seriously. What really hit home with observers is the obvious irrationality not just of the result but of the entire campaign. Hate campaigns are also growing on the continent. The socio-pathological traits of politically uninhibited aggressivity point to the fact that the all-pervasive systemic compulsions of an economically unmanaged and digitally coalescent global society simply over-stretch the forms of social integration that obtained democratically in the nation state. That unleashes regressive behaviours. One example is the Wilhelmine fantasies of, say, Jaroslav Kaczinski, mentor of the current Polish government. After the British referendum he proposed the break-up of the EU into a loose association of sovereign nation states so that these promptly coalesce into a sabre-rattling big power militarily.

You might as well put it: Kaczinski is merely reacting to the loss of control by the nation state.

Like all symptoms, this feeling of the loss of control has a real core – the hollowing out of national democracies that, until now, had given citizens the right to co-determine important conditions of their social existence. The UK referendum provides vivid evidence about the keyword “post-democracy”. Obviously, the infrastructure without which there can be no sound public sphere and party competition has crumbled. After initial analyses the media and opposing political parties failed to inform the populace about relevant questions and elementary facts, let alone make

differentiated arguments for or against opposing political views. The very low turnout of the 18-24-year-olds, supposedly disadvantaged by the elderly, is another revealing piece of data.

Sounds like the Press is guilty again...

No, but the behaviour of this age-group does highlight the way young people use media in the digital era and changes in the attitude towards politics. In Silicon Valley's ideology the market and technology will rescue society and thus make something as old-fashioned as democracy superfluous. One factor to be taken seriously is in this regard the general tendency towards an ever tighter inclusion of political parties within the organizational complex of the state. And, of course, it's no coincidence that European politics is not rooted in civil society. The Union is put together in such a way that basic economic decisions that affect society as a whole are removed from democratic choice. This technocratic emptying out of the daily agenda with which citizens are confronted is no fate of nature but the consequence of a design set out in the treaties. In this context the politically intended division of power between the national and European levels also plays a role: the power of the Union is concentrated there where nation state interests mutually block each other. A transnationalisation of democracy would be the right answer to this. There is no other way, in a highly inter-dependent global society, of offsetting the loss of control that citizens feel and complain about and, indeed, that has happened.

But hardly anybody believes in this transnationalisation of democracy any more. For the sociologist Wolfgang Streeck the EU is a deregulation machine. It failed to protect the nations from a capitalism gone wild but, rather, exposed them to it lock, stock and barrel. Now, nation states should take matters in hand again. Why should there not be a return to the old welfare state capitalism?

Streeck's analysis of the crisis is based on convincing empirical data. I also share his diagnosis of the shrivelled state of the democratic substance that until now has taken almost sole institutional shape in the nation state. And I share many similar diagnoses from political scientists and lawyers who refer to the *de*-democratising consequences of "governance" – the new political and legal forms of "governing beyond the nation state." But the case for a return to the format of small nation states is not evident to me. For these would have to be run on globalised markets on the same lines as global conglomerates. That would signify a complete abdication of politics in the face of the imperatives of unregulated markets.

There's an interesting camp formation going on. For one side the EU has outlived its purpose as a political project and Brexit is a clear signal to strip out Europe. The other side, such as Martin Schulz, says: We can't go on like this. The crisis of the EU is due to its lack of deepening – there's the euro, alright, but no European government, no economic and social policy. Who's right?

When Frank-Walter Steinmeier on the morning after Brexit seized the initiative with an invitation to the foreign ministers of the six founding states of the EU, Angela Merkel had sensed the danger straight away. This constellation could have suggested to some that the real wish was to reconstruct Europe out of its core after this series of tremors. To the contrary, she insisted on seeking first an agreement among the remaining 27 member states. Aware that a constructive agreement in this circle and with authoritarian nationalists such as Orban or Kaszinski is impossible, Angela Merkel wanted to kill any thought of further integration stone dead. In Brussels she swore the council to hold still. Perhaps she's hoping the trade and economic consequences of Brexit can be comprehensively neutralised or even rowed back upon.

Your criticism sounds pretty old hat. You've more often than not accused Ms Merkel of pursuing a policy of heads down and carry on. Or at least in European policy.

I fear this trusted policy of playing things down will carry or has already carried the day – no perspective here, please! The argument runs: Don't get het up, the EU has always changed. Indeed, this muddling through with no end in sight the still simmering euro crisis results in the EU never being able to carry on "as before". But rushing ahead with adaptation to the normality of the "dynamic gridlock" is paid for by giving up any attempt to shape events politically. And it was precisely this Angela Merkel who twice refuted emphatically the notion widely held by social scientists of a generalised lack of room for political manoeuvre – over climate change and admitting refugees in. Sigmar Gabriel and Martin Schulz are here the only prominent voices with any trace of political temperament and the ones who refuse to give into the timid retreat of the political class from any attempt to think even just three or four years ahead. This is no sign of realism if the political leadership simply lets the iron rule of history take over. "In danger and extreme emergency the middle way leads to death" – I've often thought of the film of my friend Alexander Kluge in recent days. Of course, it's only with hindsight that you learn there could have been another way. But before throwing away an alternative before it's even been attempted one ought to try and imagine our current situation as the past present for a future historian.

How can one imagine the deepening of the Union without citizens being forced to fear a further loss of democratic control? Up till now every deepening has increased euroscepticism. Years ago Wolfgang Schäuble and Karl Lamers spoke of a two-speed Europe, of a core Europe – and you agreed with them then. So, how will that work? Should not the treaties be changed in that case?

The summoning of a convention that would lead to big treaty changes and referenda would only come to pass if the EU had made perceptible and convincing attempts to tackle its most urgent problems. The still-unresolved euro crisis, the long-term refugee problem and current security issues are now called urgent problems. But the mere descriptions of those facts are not even a

consensus in the cacophonous circle of the 27 members of the European Council. Compromises can only be reached if the partners are ready to compromise and that means their interests shouldn't be too divergent. This modicum of convergence of interests is what one can at best expect from members of the Eurozone. The crisis story of the common currency, whose origins have been thoroughly analysed by experts, closely ties these countries together for several years – albeit in an asymmetrical manner. Therefore, the Eurozone would delimit the natural size of a future core Europe. If these countries had the political will, then the basic principle of “closer cooperation” foreseen in the treaties would allow the first steps towards separating out such a core – and, with it, the long-overdue formation of a counterpart to the ministerial eurogroup inside the European Parliament.

That would split the EU.

True, the argument against this plan is one of “split”. Assuming you actually want European integration, however, this argument is unfounded. For only a properly functioning core Europe could convince the presently polarised populations of all member states that the project makes sense. It's only on this basis that those populations that prefer meanwhile to hold fast to their sovereignty may gradually be won over to join – a decision that's always open (!) for them: In this perspective there must be from the outset an attempt to get the governments waiting in the wings to tolerate such a project. The first step towards a compromise within the Eurozone is pretty obvious: Germany will have to give up its resistance against closer fiscal, economic and social policy co-operation and France be ready to renounce sovereignty in these corresponding areas.

And who would block this?

My impression has long been that the likely opposition would be greater on the French side. But today that's no longer true. Every act of deepening collapses today through the obstinate resistance of the ruling CDU/CSU which for years have chosen to spare their voters a minimum of solidarity with citizens in other European countries. Whenever the next election is on the horizon they play up national economic selfishness – and systematically under-estimate the readiness of a majority of German citizens to make concessions in their own long-term interests. One must energetically offer them a forward-looking, well-founded alternative to the crippling continuation of the current course of action.

Brexit strengthens German influence. And Germany has long been seen as a hegemon. How has this perception come about?

The recovery of a supposed nation-state “normality” led to a change in that mentality in our country that had developed over decades in the old West Germany. That came with an increasingly self-confident style and more outspoken insistence on the “realistic” orientation of political attitudes in the new Berlin Republic towards the outside world. Since 2010 we've seen how the German

government treats its unwanted greater leadership role in Europe less in the general and more in its national interest. Even an editorial in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* takes issue with the counter-productive effect of German policies “because it confuses European leadership more and more with pushing through its own ideas on the political order.” Germany is a reluctant but insensitive and incapable hegemon that both uses and ignores the disturbed European balance of power at the same time. This provokes resentments, especially in other Eurozone countries. How must a Spaniard, Portuguese or Greek feel if he has lost his job as a result of the policy of spending cuts decided by the European Council? He cannot arraign the German cabinet ministers who got their way with this policy in Brussels: he cannot vote them in or out of office. Instead of which, he could read during the Greek crisis that these very politicians angrily denied any responsibility for the socially disastrous consequences that they had casually taken on board with such programmes of cuts. As long as this undemocratic and faulty structure is not got rid of you can hardly be surprised at anti-European smear campaigns. The only way to get democracy in Europe is through a deepening of European co-operation.

So, what you’re saying is that the right-wing movements will only disappear when there’s more Europe and the EU is rendered more deeply democratic?

No, I would expect them to be losing ground in the process. If my view is right then today all sides assume that the Union must regain trust to cut the ground from under the feet of the right-wing populists. One camp wants to play up its capability of impressing the right wing’s supporters by flexing its muscles. The slogan goes: ‘no more lofty visions but practical solutions.’ This point of view lies behind Wolfgang Schäuble’s public renunciation of his own idea of a core Europe. He now counts entirely upon inter-governmentalism or getting the heads of state and government to sort things out among themselves. He’s counting on the appearance of successful co-operation among strong nation states. But the examples he gives – Oettinger’s digital union, the Europeanisation of arms budgets or an energy union – would scarcely meet the desired goal of impressing people. And, when it comes to really pressing problems – he himself talks of refugee policy and the creation of a European right to asylum but bats away the dramatic youth unemployment in the southern countries – then the costs of co-operation are as high as they’ve always been. Therefore, the opposite side recommends the alternative of a deepened and binding co-operation within a smaller circle of states willing to cooperate. Such a Euro-Union has no need to seek out problems just to prove its own capacity to act. And, on the way thereto, the citizens will realize that such a core Europe will deal with those social and economic problems that lie behind the insecurity, the fear of societal decline and the feeling of losing control. Welfare state and democracy together form an inner nexus that in a currency union can no longer be secured by the individual nation state alone.

